

## 6 - Educating Wichert Students

Little is known of the early history of education in the Wichert Community. *The Kankakee County Atlas of 1883* indicates the Burns Grove School was located near property owned by William Burns. The grove that inspired the name of the school became the site where students played and where many school and community picnics, including the annual Wichert Church Sunday School picnic, were held.



The Burns School (left) also carried the Burns name; however, we don't know if William Burns was the inspiration for the names of both schools. Students were taught in one room and a second room was added later. In 1893, the Burns School was sold to the Christian Reformed Church and used as a house of worship until the church united with the Reformed Church of Koster.

In 1900, a third school was added to the district when the Wingerter School was built on land furnished by George Wingerter.



Photo by Harry Romein

By 1920, an increase in the population of Wichert brought about a need for new and larger school facilities. The Wichert Grade School (above), a two-story, four-room

schoolhouse, was built for youngsters who were in the first grade through eighth grade. Teachers taught two grade levels in each of the classrooms.

In 1955, enrollment continued to increase, prompting the addition of classrooms, an office area, a multi-purpose room, and kitchen facilities. In 1968, more classrooms were added, and a kindergarten program and a music department were set up.



Most people view Wichert as a Dutch community. About half of the students who attended the Wichert Grade School, however, came from families who lived within the community but who were not Dutch. For example, in the photo (left) of the twenty students in Mrs. Minton's 1956 fifth and sixth grade classes, nine of the students were from Dutch families while eleven were from other ethnic backgrounds.

Wichert Grade School closed in 1982 and students attended school in St. Anne or Kankakee. In subsequent years, the facilities have been used to accommodate a fitness center and a rehabilitation program (below).





In 1891, a two-year high school curriculum was added to the St. Anne Grade School, in the village of St. Anne, three miles south of Wichert. The school's curriculum was extended to four years in 1901 and the St. Anne Community High School District was organized in 1920. In 1930, a new building that accommodated about three hundred high school students was constructed (below).



*Photo by Harry Romein, 1930*

As a member of the high school Board at that time, Harry Romein expressed his commitment to education when he helped make the decision to construct the school.



The boundaries of the high school district incorporated St. Anne Township, the southern part of Aroma Township, Pembroke Township, and a portion of Papineau

Township. Students represented a diversified mix of religious, cultural, ethnic, and racial heritage that encompassed Protestant, Catholic, Black, Caucasian, Hispanic, rural, and small town backgrounds.



*The Cardinal Yearbook, 1936*

In the late-1960's, racial issues erupted amongst Black students. Tensions between Black and Caucasian students had been fomenting since 1954, when the Supreme Court ruled racial segregation in schools is unconstitutional. It wasn't uncommon for students of both races to be involved in intimidation, harassment and outright fighting. After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in 1967, however, Black students actively participated in sit-ins, stand-ins, and open protests.

To make matters worse, the school's facilities were becoming overcrowded. Voters turned down bond issues for a new and larger facility while other districts in the area refused to accept a proposal to bus more than half of the Black student body to the neighboring districts for fear of exacerbating the minority problems of those districts.



In 1975, the superintendent and school board came up with an innovative plan to deal with the overcrowding by combining regular school attendance with supportive home study and volunteer tutoring programs.

The overcrowding crisis presented to school officials was alleviated; however, the quality of education declined to the point enrollment decreased as students, including many who lived in Wichert, opted to attend schools in Kankakee.

In the summer of 2004, the building was demolished after the board and the community decided it was no longer feasible to repair and renovate the nearly seventy-five-year-old structure.



*The Cardinal Yearbook, 1936*



*Demolishing the old school in 2004*



*Current St. Anne Community High School*